



# Quest for Internet

In the 98th installment of our weekly series at [emeagwali.com](http://emeagwali.com), we present letters pertaining to Philip Emeagwali's war memoir "THUNDER ROAD TO BIAFRA." One million people died during that 30-month Nigeria-Biafra Civil War. A little known fact is that emeagwali.com provided the intellectual inspiration to the rank-and-file MASSOBians (The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra). MASSOBians voted Emeagwali as "The Chief Scientist of Biafra." Below is a piece sent to us by a young Biafran activist.

Sent: Tue 8/21/07 5:46 PM

**GlobalActing Poets** (globalactingpoets@yahoo.com)

Dear Prof. Emeagwali,

The below story in an attachment is sent to you to read.

Thanks

Odimegwu Onwumere



General Odumegwu Ojukwu inspecting Biafran troops.

## Snake

By, Odimegwu Onwumere

Brought to Oji River forcefully, from the International Trainers Medical Centre Enugu, where they were attended to with care and passion, many of them detests the new resettlement. Because, any body that passes them spits. One of them is lying on the pavement of a building, dirty. Quite seemingly, he is unaware of the general consternation around them. They cause heavy traffic of vehicles. This yields to deafening blaring of horns and deafening siren of screeching and crawling gold, silver and scrap vans. People, who have not seen them before, eagerly detach glares. Their deep and kwashiorkor ridden eyes burrowed by hunger are acutely and irascibly stared at spectators. Walking corpses, emaciated souls, pathetic figures, thin lips, barefoot, wearing faded shirts and trousers; most of them are badly soiled with feaces and urine that has spread to their wheelchairs.

Okam is a journalist among the uninvited spectators; he goes closer to them to know whom they really are, against the aspersions that were cast on them as witches and wizards. Inching closer and staring at

the pathetic figures, Okam bursts into deep tears. He beats his chest later, goes closer and prostrates behind the one lying on the pavement.



Biafran refugees 5 Aug 1968 (AP)

By the side of the one lying, is an obsolete satchel. Okam noticed that the man is not insane, but something is wrong. Okam looks at the rest with curiosity, wanting them to say something, but they did not blink. Trying to get a word from them, runs in Mrs. Chika Igwe panting, panging and prattling.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Man?” She asks. “What do you intend to do with my husband?”

“Nothing, Madam”, replies Okam.

“If nothing, then, why are you here?”

“I am here to get information of who these people are”, replies Okam. “My name is Okam, I am a journalist”.

“A journalist? Oh!” Mrs. Chika Igwe exclaims. “That is great”. She puts her hand into the cellophane bag she arrived with and brings out pack of food. Okam pulls up the feeble octogenarian and propels him up in a sitting position. Mrs. Chika Igwe feeds him with the contents of the pack – rice and beans. He drinks water after eating the food.

Seeing that the exercise of feeding the presumed husband of Mrs. Chika Igwe is over, Okam asks, “who are they?”

Mrs. Chika Igwe draws closer the obsolete satchel beside her husband, opens it and brings out an Identity Card. The Identity Card reads:

Biafran Soldier: Oji River War Disabled Camp, Enugu State.

Name: Mr. Ike Igwe

Address: Mbelo Local Government Area.

File No: Bs/PEN-E-STATE 112

Next of Kin: Mrs. Chika Igwe

After he finished going through the Identity Card, he opens his eyes in uttermost shock. He least believed that people who fought to defend their fatherland could be debased and demeaned to this extent.



New head of state Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, seen in Engu shortly after the declaration of independence and formation of the new state of Biafra, in this file photo dated June 10, 1967, as he takes the oath of office.

“This is a shocker”, he says, and pleads to leave.

“Don’t leave! I wish you could report on this, to tell the world how these men are suffering. They are abandoned since the Nigerian-Biafran civil war ended, over thirty-seven years ago”.

“This is a shocker. I will. But permit me to leave. I will come back. I will report on this. I promise”.

“Okay, I pray you do according to your promise. You know that journalists are the mouthpiece of the teeming masses, especially people like these men”, says Mrs. Chika Igwe, and after the exchange of pleasantries Okam Leaves.

As soon as Okam walks out, he meets Mr. Zulu. Mr. Zulu fought assiduously for the Biafran army and lost his right leg in the warfront. His skeletal body tells any body that encounters him that he is living by the

grace of God. Like a whirlwind, his life fades away each chiming second. His body is an eyesore with uncountable sores. Flies celebrate unending festival of feast on them. Looking for something to eat, with a swell of the one leg and un-kempt appearance like the biblical king turned beast Nebuchadnezzar, he roams Oji River.



“I know that something must kill a man, but do I deserve to die this way for a price I paid for my land?” he asks. “There are two things my soul longs for now, food or death. Though I am hungry, but death would be preferably now so that the son of Biafra will have a perfect resting place”. He staggers and was walking out on Okam. Pitiably, Okam brings out his writing materials and begins to write, takes out his digital camera and begins to snap. He asks Mr. Zulu many questions, but he cannot respond to all, due to fast failing of his memory.

“You ask too many questions. I was a Biafran Captain. I fought in Nssuka, Oni-Imo, Owerri, Abagana sectors and in many other places. I saw that shelling machines were not merciful to trees, buildings and on its target – human beings. Civilians covered the zinc of their buildings with palm-fronds for the aircraft not to locate them”, says Mr. Zulu. “Retrossing on my life before the war, I was a wealthy man and owned a building in Rivers State where I lived. But when the war ended and my younger brother went to claim it, the Erewki Community claimed it as an ABANDONED property. They said Erewki is not Biafra, but Biafra claimed Erewki as Biafrans. Erewki detest us the core Igbos. We are to them like ‘shit’ a dog detests to eat. They say that they are Rivers people, while the name they answer is Igbo. Being a Rivers man or woman is no tribe. Rivers is not a tribe!”

“Really?” asks Okam.



Biafra War Veterans at Oji River camp  
(December 21, 2007).

“Yes. Saboteurs the people may be”, replies Mr. Zulu. “While Biafra was fighting Nigerians with an ebullient spirit to claim their mandate of secession, Erewki were agitating for the creation of Rivers State out of Biafraland. They succeeded! But their presumed friends who gave them the mandate are now their foes. The creation of the state was meant to destabilize us, just as our colonial masters from Britain indoctrinated us with Indirect Rule – but God saw us through. We fought the war with nothing. Our land of Bakassi Peninsula – where Biafra imports foods from – was seized by Nigeria and was signed to Cameroon. Hunger stole many of us, but could not steal us all. We fought the war with tear and tears. We fought the war with antiquity in place of a gun. We used sticks as spears and were commended, “One Nigerian, one bullet”. We manufactured *Ogbunaigwe* ourselves. We dug bunkers and trenches with bare hands and lived with bedbugs. We ate cassava and other foods raw. We drove cars with coconut water and our wives delivered their children in the bush, on the plantain leaves. Our women and children were crying. But we consoled ourselves with this song:

I am going to shoot gun at Nssuka/

I am going to shoot gun at Hausa/

Baby, do you ask me to run?

Who will shoot the gun if Hausa comes?

Hei! Hei!! Hei!!! Biafra wins the war with armoured car,  
shelling machine manufactured by us, and with heavy artillery/  
they can never win Biafra.

Hearing the pathetic story, Okam decides to go back to where Mrs. Chika Igwe is, but stopped, at envisaging that Mr. Zulu is not done.

“Before I joined the army”, Mr. Zulu continues, “As I have said earlier, I was a wealthy man”.



Biafra war veterans at Oji River

“So, as a wealthy man then, what prompted your joining the army?”

“I did not join the army by force, just as a lot of young and advanced men were forced into the army. But my joining the army was born the day a trainload of mutilated Biafrans, tied in raffia from the Hausaland, dropped the Biafrans before my glare. I was posted to Umuagbai in Ndoki, now in Rivers State. This was where I sustained the bullet wound that led to the amputation of my leg... Britain was



not favorable to Biafra! Egypt was not favourable to Biafra! Russian women were piloting Nigeria's aircrafts! We had no body except God... I am now praying for food to survive or death to rest". Okam forces himself and goes out from Mr. Zulu, to where Mrs. Chika Igwe is. There, he sees Mr. Obi.

Mr. Obi hails from Ukwa, in Imo State – a part in Biafra. He is told who Okam is and he is happy, showcasing that by making the cross sign and welcoming every air around him.

"Mr. Obi got a bullet wound at Abagana sector in Anambra State, where he was enlisted in the army at the age of eighteen. He has three children. They are all male. They are now in the village and have no job to do, no body to help. They are not independent, but now they are, because there is no body to help, no body to take care of them", Mrs. Chika Igwe tells Okam. "His first son is barely four years old and he can not visit them because of his condition". Okam is touched; he begins to interview the men one after the other. He walks to Mr. Oko who is behind Mr. Obi.



War veterans at Ojukwu's funeral

Mr. Oko shares in the same fate of the dividend of war. He hails from Awka in Anambra State. He bursts into tears often, anytime he reminisces at the past. And he will say, "The British is treacherous, they engineered Nigeria not to agree on Biafra's secession".

His two children are in the village though grownups, but not under his tutelage. It pains him that he cannot fend for his family. However, in this condition, whatever the good spirited passersby give them, he sends part of his own share to his family.

"Who were you before the war?" Okam asks him.

'I was a palm wine tapper and was twenty years old when I fought the war", he replies. "I sustained this bullet wound in the course of trying to safe a Biafran soldier who was shot in the warfront at Abagana".

There are statements from the other interviewees thus:

"Not every body in the Oji River Resettlement Centre is disabled like most of us who had spinal cord paralysis, some of us are in excruciating pains, but can walk".

"We can not do any other work as men than begging people for alms".

"When spirited people heed to our plea that is when we would eat".

“We were over three thousand wounded Biafran soldiers that were brought to this Centre, by the Nigerian government, but we are now only sixty”.

“The death of others occurred after our administrator, Chief Ibakpu Akisa died”.

“Chief Ibakpu manned the centre and looked after us tenderly without any form of partiality”.

“No body has been appointed in place, and as a result, we are bereft of care”.

“The Nigerian government only pays much gusto to the wounded Nigerian soldiers, but left us in anguish and despair”.

“The Nigerian government wants us to die, that is why they abandoned us to our fate”.

“Disabled Veterans of Biafra was formed as an organization to console ourselves; this was because the Biafrans, the Eastern States, Ndi-Igbo whom we sacrificed our lives and belongings to defend have joined those from the opposite and neglects us”.

A mixture of provoked sobs, they tell Okam how they make sure whatever their benefactors give them reach every one of them. The items are, apart from money and foods, plasters and drugs they use in treating their wounds.

“Is that why they leave the camp to the road?” Okam asks Mrs. Chika Igwe.

“Yes”, she replies. “Since either the government or any hospital is taking care of them that is why they look messy. Though, abandoned, but they do everything to see they live a joyous life”.

“I have seen”.

“I can say that it is this peace and love they share together that has kept them alive today. Apart from the number here, there are many who are in the rooms in the camp. They cannot walk and have no body to carry them to the road. They are in pains. But whatever that is gotten here reaches them”.

“This is on the amiss”, says Okam, with mixed feelings. “Though I was born after the war, but I was told and have also read from books that the war was characterized by the then Head of State, General Bukuya Nowog as “no victor, no vanquished”.

“That statement only exist on the pages of our newspapers”, replies Mrs. Chika Igwe. “Is there any need using a mirror on a bracelet wore on the wrist?”

“There is no need”.

“There you are”, says Mrs. Chika Igwe. “Since after the war they were brought here, there have been no means, no method, they have not used to draw the attention of the Nigerian government, but they are pummeled on the ground”.

“I saw!” exclaims Okam.

“If the government is applying the “no victor, no vanquished” phrase, why would these men be left non-challantly, un-catered for and un-rehabilitated? This act is occasioned by the power that be, so that the relics of war would die unsung”.

“Even, I heard and read from books also that immediately the war ended, some of the army officers who were serving in the Nigerian army, before the outbreak of the war were recalled, refined, paid their gratuities, their pensions and their entitlements”.

“Not only that, but also, the Biafran policemen were once called up by the government to come and collect their entitlements. We were happy. But as the air carried that news, so the air rested it. Nothing worked out. For these disabled, no body has remembered to call them, let alone that it did not hold water”, replies Mrs. Chika Igwe. “Ndi-Igbo generally have not organized their home, they are individually pursuing the political game, unlike other tribes that are much informed, and much organized and are holding the power since after the war till date. To buttress this, imagine that the Biafran leader and warlord, Col. Kaeme Ukwujo lamented the mayhem that were unleashed to Ndi-Igbo by the Hausa dominated northern part of Nigeria, to all the cronies of the world, but have not lamented to even Nigeria about these men”.

“That is bad”.

“How bad that act is, confined to bed all the while, Mr. Igwe has not seen the sun for over two years now, except that I beat my chest and decided to bring him outside”, replies Mrs. Chika Igwe, crying. “I thank God who touches the hearts of passersby, who throw money at them, if not, what would have been their fate? Some of the individuals bring water, cooked and raw foods to them. They help these men bail water from the Centre’s rooms, whenever there was heavy downpour, because the eaves are hampered”.

“I will talk of them, men of circumstances who did not agitate for them war, the war on its own was a child of circumstance”.

“Though, disabled in the bushy and squalid environment but not in the head, they have written lots of letters for help. The numerous letters attract just few attentions of people and organizations that came with paltry sums. They are yet to know the mind of the Biafran leader, Col. Kaeme Ukwujo, because no word of encouragement has come from him, knowing fully well that they are here, Ndi-Igbo socio-cultural organization called *Ezeanoha* came once”.

Apart from shouting foul and blue murder, they also quite often shout pains on any part of their bodies and burst into tears. Okam tells them that he will consult the United Nations (UN) on this. They are emboldened, at least, to enjoy rehabilitation and catered for, once again. Okam, amidst sobs, bids them goodbye and leaves.

Barely two weeks he left the disabled, comes in Louis Okenwa, a notorious army official, he is on duty sent by his superior. He was not enlisted in the army when the war was fought.

As he arrives at the Centre, he watches the disabled make money from passersby. ‘Art of Satan’ envelops him and he becomes gluttonous. He turns his gun, an assault rifle, against the people he is asked to look after. They look at him, in uttermost dismay; utter disarray steals the money given them by people and leaves. They watch him move, they lay curse at him, though in his absent.

As Louis Okenwa is going, he is happy. He meets a woman and her daughter at Oji Junction whose car tyre deflated. They are looking for help. Reprieve comes to them when they see him and he promises to assist them. First, he requests one thousand naira, which he explained would be the cost to repair the

tyre at a vulcanizer's workshop five kilometers from the spot. Madam Nkechi gives him the money while Nkeiru her daughter thanks him as he leaves.

As soon as the money is given, he vanished with the tyre into the thin air. Madam Nkechi and her daughter are bewildered, because the road is deserted. It is bad with red mud and motorists dread it so much. They are bemused if they should leave the car, for the safety of their lives. "Thanks, God!" they say when they see a police patrol van coming. They stand up from the bonnet of the car they were sitting and flag down the van to stop, but they are disappointed, the van drives past.

Being dispirited after long waiting of Louis Okenwa, suddenly he appears like a ghoul to them with the deflated tyre put in place. He helps and fixes the tyre up. Madam Nkechi and Nkeiru glow with pride, saying that Louis Okenwa is a Good Nigerian, not knowing that they are close to their Waterloo.

After Louis Okenwa fixed the tyre, emerge two haggard young boys, from where the duo cannot explain. They commandeer them to enter into the car, and they obliged. This is a fact that explains that the boys mean mischief. In a fierce operation they drive to an uncompleted building at a serene location in Oji Junction and rape them. After the shoddy exercise they ask Madam Nkechi and her daughter to drive out before the pronouncement of Jack, and they obliged to it and left, crying.

Louis Okenwa's superior posts him on guard duty in another place after an interrogation reportedly that he hand-bent the disabled of which he denied. He is the guard commander in this place. His superior knows him to be a dutiful man, and he is doing his job when one of their numbers comes to him and tells that he has a deal he envisages will pay them. Louis Okenwa thinks of what the deal is like and has to ask his colleague to explain.

“It is about a rich man in town. My spy told me that he came in with huge sum of money from the city”, the colleague tells him. Louis Okenwa’s brain runs crackers on hearing that the matter concerns money, a huge one at that. Quickly, he makes a call and contacts an ex-military official. That official contacts another who looks for a commercial vehicle that will convey them for the evil plot.

As soon as Louis Okenwa and his cohort leave the duty post and set for the journey, their fate illumines than never. The man they are going to rob is driving out. Louis Okenwa brings out his gun and points it at the man. The man begins to beg them, begins to plead that they should not kill him. Rather, they should go to his house and take all his money. They commandeer and assure him that they mean no harm; if only he will cooperate according to his promise. He takes them to his house and they cart away the sum of two million naira. They thank the man and begin to leave.

As they are going, unknowingly to them, their victim had telephoned the police. Their fate is opaque now. In a counter attack and sporadic shootings with the police, they are overpowered and they surrender. This is because the police are many. They are taken to the police station and mammoth crowds of journalists come to report the incident.

The day Okam intends to return to the disabled is the day this incident takes place. He has bought a newspaper that has the story and the pictures of the robbers. He takes the newspapers to the camp, oblivious that the disabled are robbed. One of them collects the newspapers from him after welcoming him, only to be irked to see the face of Louis Okenwa on it. He calls his colleagues who come, celebrating the victory, the fact that explains that God has answered their prayers.

Okam looks at them in shock, but they tell him that he has nothing to be bias they are robbed. Okam sees this as a clear yardstick to write the United Nations and other financial donour institutions he has thought for help. They have fun more than as usual and he leaves.



Using the letterhead, “Disabled Veterans of Biafra” to write across the globe, one of the letters attracts the attention of Ndi-Igbo in the United States. They send money across. He is happy and goes to the Centre and gives them a paltry sum, out of much that is given him.

However, there is already existing report that one man, not minding the situation of these men in grief, becomes a mischievous element. The man takes the advantage of agonic condition of these men and exploits them. But the man ends up in the police net when he was caught with the head of a fifteen-year-old boy he cut for rituals. They trust Okam for his kind gesture: he is a difference. He brings out from his pocket a form and asks them to append their signatures on it.

“This will foster us so that the donours wouldn’t doubt the authenticity of my letter”, he tells them, and without any delay, the men sign the form and he leaves. While he is leaving, they shower him with accolades and encomium and his shoulder rises like that of a peacock.

When he gets home, there is a letter awaiting him in a mailbox hanging adjacent his door. He picks it and begins to read, before opening the door of his room. The letter is from the office of the Secretary General of United Nations, asking him the bank in Nigeria that he will go and cash money, money counting in million dollars. It directs him to use the money and open a manufacturing industry for the disabled, to be independent and self reliance. This will be operated by their kiths and kins. Whatever they may workout shall be what they should spend for the up keep of the disabled. In conclusion, United Nations thanks him for his benevolence approach to becoming the voice of the men. Okam closes his eyes in appraisal to God, places the letter on his forehead. Quickly, he leaves his house and set back for the Centre, sweating and panting like a raced deer from the tropics to the Sub-Sahara African desert.

He gets to the Centre, gets the men together. However, he has also read that the men shall sign their signatures on a receipt attached to the letter to show that the money is for the appropriate destination before cashing the money from the bank. He tells them of the development and they are pleased. They sign the receipt like a fowl spattering the bare ground with its fist. He thanks them and leaves.

The wives, kiths and kins of the men keep him in surveillance after having a meeting. In the meeting, they resolve going to inform the police to be cognizance and help them in safeguarding the to-be instituted industry. Again, to avert interrogation that comes from the police: "Where did you get the machines from?" "They are stolen machines". "If you said they are bought, where did you get the money from and where is the receipt?" The police assist doing their bid after they are intimidated.

After two weeks, the money mature for withdrawal, Okam goes to the bank and withdraws it. He first, reaches to a car stand and buys a Land Cruiser Jeep and dumps the rest money in the boot. He sees this as his ascension. He drives to a sewing machine shop. The shop attendant tells him how much each type of the machine cost. There are new and fairly used machines there. He is to buy fifty pieces, but when he calculates the cost for fifty new machines and fairly used ones, the difference is clear. He goes for the fairly used which are almost scrapped. He hires a van that helps convey it to the Centre.

When the disabled see the machines, there are deafening ovations from them. He shares money to their wives, kiths and kins and advises them to go and learn how to operate them at any workshops seamstresses around.

After six months, they have acquired the skill and come to use the machine. They are disappointed on the state of the machines. They invite the police to investigate the matter. The police did not crawl like a snail, which has been their nature in investigating matters, they mount on a high horse, only to find out to their dismay or chagrin that Okam has robbed the disabled of their mammoth glory and paid them pittance. Against this ignorable act, Okam is arrested.

Mrs. Chika Igwe least expects that Okam she trusts because he is a journalist could assuage such fraud. Journalists she says are the mouthpieces of the populace? She covers her face in shame, but warns against journalists who are after brown envelopes. From the crowd there are statements thus:

“This is a typical example that many of the Relief Agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations are instituted to rob the people they are meant to help”.

“The journalist is pitiless and deserves the wrath of he law”.

“He deserves capital punishment”.

“He has provoked the hampered spirits of the starved, victimized, depraved, abandoned and debased who were once seen as heroes”.

“He will not go unpunished now and for ever more”.

“Amen”, they rested their anger.

At the glare and contempt of Okam and the act, a police draws him up from the ground he is kneeling. When they ask him to explain the reason of this brazenly act. He says, “My parents are dead. Dad died in the Biafran war, fighting for the Biafran army, while mum died of a breast cancer. I ate ashes for bread and drank my tears for tea. I passed through a lot of rigours of life to attain this height. The government does not want to create job opportunities for its citizenry. The once created have no job security. University graduates are forced to do odd jobs. That is why there is high level of crime in the country”.

“So, you feel that there is no other alternative to survive in our country than indulging in crime?” a police official asks him. He is yet to respond before the venom spitting myriad want to descend on him. He pleads with the police, “Do not allow them to kill me. There is one axiom we all must not forget. “Snake that does not feed on others can never be long”.

“You are not only snake that feeds on others to grow or on other living beings but also vulture that eats the dead. You did not have pity for these men for their condition and you tread the path of fraud,” another police official tells him. But instead of being remorseful the police have thought Okam to be, he still has strength in his muscles.

“Yes, I agree. I am snake that feeds on others. After all, am I not one of the relics of the war? After all, my father died for Biafra and has not been paid his gratuities!” he shouts. The police take him out from the mob and begin to journey to the police station with him. The mob is booing him. When he turns to look at them, they call him, “Snake! Snake!! Snake!!!” And wish they have their way, they will chop him up.

## **This story is a fiction!**

### **The Author:**

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